Neelima Mandava

**Haiti: The Aftershocks of History**

The author of this book, Laurent Dubois, highlights how Haiti’s current poverty and instability is a product of its history. Haiti, both the land and the people, suffered through the presence of various foreign countries dictating their movements, instability with the constant change of leadership, ultimately leading to the civilian concerns and well-being always being insubordinate to every other issue that Haiti faced.

The reason that Haiti was always so attractive to all these foreign powers was due to its natural riches of resources and land that was perfect for growing crops, in particular sugar, bananas, and coffee. However, to the foreign powers, the Haitians themselves are dispensable and they were forced into slave labor. Harvesting these crops, in particular sugar cane was torturous and strenuous work. The slaves were dying in irreplaceable numbers with between five to ten percent of the slave population dying every year. The planters would simply let the slaves die and buy more from Africa as that was the cheaper option than the proposed reforms. The Africans and creoles found strength amongst each other through their own development of rituals and ceremonies that came from a wide variety of African traditions. This gave birth to a new language, Kreyol. Since it was against the colonial laws to move from the plantation, the development of this language helped connect the different slaves in different parts of Haiti. And this is what ultimately made it possible for the conspirators of the 1791 revolution to organize the coordinated assault on the slave and plantation owners. Slavery was formerly abolished in August 1793. But this victory came with its own set of problems as the economy took a downfall. The former slaves were obligated to remain on their plantations and while they were no longer slaves, they were called “cultivators” and they would receive a quarter of what was produced on the plantation in return for their labor.

Even after Haiti had finally gained independence from being under long time rule under France, it never got the recognition of being independent from France and soon the US. When France finally recognized the Haiti was independent, they made the Haitian government pay an indemnity of 150 million francs in order to compensate the slaveholders for their losses. With this, it was as though the Haitians had to pay for the land that was already rightfully theirs, three times over. First with the tears, sweat and blood of their slave ancestors working on the land with no pay, and then during their revolution to get rid of the France influence and finally in cash. Pretty soon however, France became the least of their worry as the US came in and occupied Haiti with the justification that they wanted to improve and democratize Haiti’s political institution. However, as more and more of the US agricultural companies entered Haiti, all that resulted was the deprivation of the land from peasants, from which they would earn their livelihood from.

Besides foreign powers, Haiti suffered in the leaders of it’s own people as well. Many of its leaders believed that only by establishing the country as a self-sustaining, economically thriving power, the country would stop being subordinate to its former colonizers and seen as an equal. However, the means that each leader took to go about this caused much more turmoil than benefit to the country. The problem was building an economy based on free labor in a land entirely constructed around slavery thus far. Some of the leaders went to work with the US government in order to try and gain their support in the economic advances that they hoped would occur in Haiti. However, as the education levels amongst the Haitians began to increase, many of the younger students started to protest against this kind of involvement again. The government even rose the electoral voting age to 25, to prevent the younger people from having a say in Haitian matters. Even to recent days, elections are occasions for shadowy and violent political conflict and the population has no control at all over foreign governments who still call the shots in Haiti.

People in Haiti simply feel disempowered. They believe that hope for real change is difficult to summon and it has gotten to the point where even demonstrators are chanting “Nou Bouke!” or “We’re tired!”